



A Race against Time to Halt Sudan's Collapse

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What's new? The Sudanese army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces have waged open warfare for more than two months, causing terrible death and destruction in the capital Khartoum, Darfur and elsewhere. Both sides appear dug in, viewing the conflict as existential. Mediation has yielded little, as ceasefires have come and gone.

Why does it matter? The fighting threatens to engulf the country, with devastating effects on the millions of civilians who are unable to flee. It could also spill across borders. An unstable Sudan would be perilous for the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Mediterranean and Red Sea basins.

What should be done? Despite the great difficulty, diplomats should keep trying – coordinating their efforts – to persuade the warring parties to desist. Washington and Riyadh should lead the way. In parallel, the African Union should confer with Sudanese civilian representatives about assembling a technocratic caretaker cabinet that can start work if the fighting stops.

I. Overview

Sudan is careening toward state failure. More than two months in, fighting between the Sudanese army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) persists, with neither able to clinch a decisive advantage. The cost to Sudanese is horrific: hundreds killed, more than a million displaced, the capital Khartoum, Sudan's economic and political centre, a shell of a city and elites critical to keeping the country functioning fleeing en masse. A collapsing Sudan will prove a nightmare for the region for decades to come. The belligerents have thus far thumbed their noses at mediation efforts. Convincing them to halt the carnage will be an uphill struggle, perhaps even impossible. But given what is at stake, diplomats should nonetheless redouble efforts. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia should work more closely with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to marshal higher-level outreach to urge the warring parties to stand down. They should coordinate better with the African Union (AU), which should in tandem consult with Sudanese about forming a caretaker government that can step in if the shooting stops.

The fighting has settled into a grinding stalemate centred in Khartoum and a few provinces, notably in Darfur, but it is spreading to other parts of the country. While the army has airpower the RSF does not, its infantry appears outmatched by the para-

military fighters who have flooded the capital. RSF personnel have fanned out into residential areas, where they loot widely and use those who have not yet fled as human shields. Strategic sites such as the presidential palace, the army and RSF headquarters, and the bridges that connect Khartoum's various districts have changed hands many times. The city has practically ceased functioning, with almost no service provision for the millions who remain trapped there. Most hospitals are shuttered. Safe drinking water and food are scarce, while electricity is mostly out. Schools are closed, universities and their libraries sacked. Commerce has come to a near standstill, with checkpoints blocking traffic in every direction. Banks are inaccessible, and cash is hard to come by. Records vital to maintaining the state are destroyed.

Grave as things are, they seem poised to get worse. A string of failed ceasefires suggests that neither side wants to risk letting its opponent regroup. Yet neither has a clear upper hand. The conflict is spreading outside the capital, plunging other areas into horrendous and, in some cases, inter-ethnic bloodletting. Darfur, long a tinderbox, has exploded into fighting along ethnic lines with dozens killed and tens of thousands uprooted from their homes. The longer it lasts, the taller the odds that any part of Sudan will remain unaffected. It is hard to overstate the damage a drawn-out conflict in Sudan could do. Such a war would likely splinter the country, devastating the population, while creating a haven for jihadist militants, mercenaries and traffickers who in turn could bedevil the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Mediterranean and Red Sea basins for years to come.

Despite the dramatic stakes, diplomacy to date has fallen short of what the moment demands. Talks led by Saudi Arabia and the U.S. in Jeddah, the Saudi Arabian city on the Red Sea, have yielded several nominal ceasefires. None has held for a sustained period. A ceasefire agreed on 18 June held up better than previous ones, at least in Khartoum, before full-scale hostilities resumed two days later. Neighbouring countries, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (or IGAD, the Horn of Africa's regional bloc) and the AU have also tried to mediate but without success.

True, obstacles to a deal that persuades the belligerents to desist are forbidding, perhaps even for now insurmountable. The generals who have pushed Sudan into all-out war view the conflict as a fight for survival: in essence, it is a cut-throat battle for power and wealth between two well-matched sides that have both benefited from the Sudanese state's historical dysfunction. Still, more can be done to ratchet up pressure on the warring parties, work through a compromise that might induce them to stop fighting or, at least, warn outside powers that might get embroiled in the conflict not to do so.

All involved should upgrade their diplomacy. The U.S., given its access to all parties, should better mesh its work with that of the African, Middle Eastern and European actors who are also trying to make peace. At present, a small team in the State Department's Africa bureau is handling the U.S. effort. Washington should appoint a special envoy able to engage in sustained high-level diplomacy to bridge potential divides, such as between the Gulf Arab powers and Sudan's African neighbours, and to coordinate stronger pressure on the belligerents. Washington, together with Riyadh, also needs to step up efforts to ensure that Egypt, which is the army's main external backer, and the United Arab Emirates, which has ties to the RSF, throw their full weight behind a ceasefire. A role for Cairo and Abu Dhabi – and for the AU, which is trying to forge a political track to negotiations – in the Jeddah talks might make sense

to align the various diplomatic endeavours. Together, all those with influence should push the RSF and Sudanese army in particular to send representatives with decision-making authority to Jeddah.

Precisely how to forge a way out is unclear; to some degree, offering a prescription is akin to grasping at straws. Still, it might make sense that mediators push for at least the contours of a deal on Sudan's security sector, the dispute that triggered the fighting. A compromise might entail an accelerated merger of the two forces into a single unit – a core army demand – in exchange for commitments to make other reforms and broaden the military's command structure, with Hemedti included in the leadership. A basic agreement, with details hashed out later, might pave the way to a more sustained ceasefire, which in turn could open the way to talks about the country's political future. (Thus far, mediators have pushed, without success, for a short-term humanitarian ceasefire in the hope that it opens a path to wider talks.)

At the same time, the AU, which has formed a coordination group among major external actors and promises to launch a political process, should, alongside IGAD, work with eminent Sudanese to forge a rescue plan in hopes that the Jeddah talks make progress. Neither the RSF nor the army – even in the unlikely event that either prevails on the battlefield – will be able to govern Sudan when the war is over. Both forces are widely reviled. One option, when the shooting does stop, would thus be to form an emergency caretaker civilian government acceptable to, among others, the warring parties themselves and tasked with the narrow mandate of managing humanitarian aid, facilitating a peace process and preparing for the country's reconstruction. The AU should focus on laying the groundwork for such a body while continuing to play the critical role of coordinating various actors in a single forum. Sudanese, meanwhile, should resist the temptation to form a government in exile, which would only deepen the country's divisions.

The bitter conflict in the heart of Khartoum and elsewhere could well tip one of Africa's biggest countries into state collapse. The importance of stopping it before it evolves into a more diffuse, sectarian civil war that the two sides' leaders cannot themselves end, even if they want to, cannot be stressed enough. Sudanese are paying an intolerable price. Countries in the region – and well beyond – also stand to suffer from a crumbling Sudanese state. All actors with influence over the belligerents should do all they can to steer them toward a negotiated settlement, however daunting the task.

II. Seeds of War

The seeds of Sudan's conflict were sown most prominently by Omar al-Bashir, the strongman overthrown amid a popular uprising in 2019. Bashir, like several of his predecessors, tried to shield his regime from threat by taking steps that weakened both civil society and key institutions of state. To forestall the sort of revolt that had toppled previous leaders, he gutted the country's robust trade unions, professional associations and universities, while undermining its traditional political parties and creating a patronage network of tribal leaders throughout the country. Having himself seized power in a 1989 coup, he also set out to build a force that could counter the army. For that purpose, Bashir established an array of security units and tribal militias that he also leaned on to battle insurgents. Toward the end of his rule, he grew increas-

ingly reliant on the RSF, which he forged in 2013 out of pro-government militias in Darfur and deployed in Khartoum as something of a praetorian guard.

In the end, Bashir lost power, but his rule left Sudan next to ungovernable after his fall. As the 2019 uprising raged, a committee of Bashir's top security officials agreed to oust him and take the reins themselves. At the apex of the new military power structure were General Mohamed "Hemedti" Hamdan Dagalo, the RSF leader, and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, a high-ranking but low-profile army bureaucrat who had worked closely with Hemedti during the counter-insurgency campaign in Darfur. They had also fought together in Yemen, during which time each of them developed ties in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which were paying Sudanese forces to fight on their side of the war. The two generals formed a transitional military council, with Burhan as chair and Hemedti as deputy, backstopped by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After a months-long standoff with the protesters, Burhan and Hemedti acquiesced to handing over most powers to civilian leaders and paving the way for elections. Yet in practice both worked to consolidate their grip on authority and key sectors of Sudan's economy.

From the start, the two military wings struggled to contain their own rivalry. High-ranking army officers resented Hemedti's unchecked rise, which began during the war in Darfur, gained extra momentum from his role in Yemen and then accelerated after his patron Bashir was removed. Hemedti, too, made clear his ambition to rule Sudan, a scenario the army brass, drawn largely from the historical riverine elite, consider a threat to their long-time political and economic dominance. Antagonism between Hemedti and Burhan deepened after a 2021 coup in which they dissolved the civilian government together, but then fell out, as Sudanese widely rejected the military takeover and international financial assistance dried up. Amid internal and external pressure to reverse the putsch, Hemedti saw an opportunity to win political advantage. He began publicly distancing himself from Burhan and the coup, while Burhan looked to Bashir's old circles for support. Both continued to recruit with new urgency, with the army also trying to mobilise members from a rival subclan of Hemedti's Rizeigat tribe.¹

Tensions spiked again after a December 2022 agreement to restore civilian rule, brokered largely by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia under the auspices of the Quad (which also includes the UK and UAE).² Hemedti championed the deal, appearing increasingly aligned with civilian leaders who were negotiating with the generals. Resistance to the pact accordingly rose in the army.³

Intra-Arab competition also began to mount. The UAE, whose participation in the Quad had been inconsistent, backed the December deal even as Egypt, Burhan's main external ally, which prefers military rule in Sudan and felt sidelined by the Quad's diplomacy, worked to undermine it.⁴ Egypt shares the Sudanese army's antipathy for

¹ Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese diplomats, February-March 2023.

² The negotiations were overseen in Khartoum by the U.S. and Saudi ambassadors to Sudan, who are now co-leading the mediation effort in Jeddah.

³ General Shams al-Din Kabbashi, a member of the Sovereign Council, outlined the army's reservations in a statement issued on 5 February 2023 in Kadugli, South Kordofan.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian diplomats, 2022-2023. Egypt supports the Sudanese army despite its large contingent of Islamist officers linked to Bashir. Egyptian officials acknowledge their concern about these elements, particularly those that might have ties to the Muslim Brotherhood

Hemedti and views his ties with the UAE with suspicion.⁵ Although long dependent itself on Saudi Arabia and the UAE for economic assistance, Cairo resents the Gulf powers' rising influence on the African shores of the Red Sea, particularly in Sudan, which it considers part of its historical realm of influence.⁶ Many Sudanese and other diplomats suspect Egypt of encouraging internal army opposition to the civilian handover.⁷

Both sides escalated, with Hemedti bringing more and more fighters into Khartoum in a show of force. When the two sides entered final talks about the RSF's future, with pressure mounting to hand power back to civilians, the generals around Burhan demanded that the RSF merge into the regular military, coming under its chain of command, within two years. Hemedti rejected that idea, proposing instead that he report directly to a civilian government for the transitional period and a ten-year timeframe for integrating the two forces.⁸ Civilian negotiators and mediators supported Hemedti's stance. All three of Burhan's interlocutors in the talks accused the army of backtracking on previous understandings.⁹ Both sides continued to pre-position for conflict. On 15 April, fighting erupted in Khartoum and Meroe, an ancient city on the Nile's eastern bank and the site of an important air base.

Just weeks into the fighting, life in greater Khartoum, home to roughly a quarter of Sudan's population, is unrecognisable. The destruction of infrastructure – including hospitals, schools and government buildings as well as water, electricity and communication networks – is extensive. Many factories and businesses lie in ruins.¹⁰ While the RSF pillages Khartoum, the army bombs its neighbourhoods. With so many homes looted of valuables, and others in smithereens, those with the means to do so are leaving. Most major traders have scattered. Since Khartoum is the commercial heart of the country, its plight will reverberate well outside the city limits: with the planting season looming, for instance, the agencies that ordinarily would distribute seeds, fuel and fertiliser to farmers have all closed down. The months ahead could bring humanitarian disaster to the Sudanese countryside.

As Khartoum falls apart, Darfur in western Sudan looks like it could tip back into a multi-sided conflict drawing in parties from adjacent countries. Most Darfuris reject the war and are keen to avoid more bloodshed.¹¹ Still, fighting has already broken out along the ethnic divide – separating those who identify as Arab from those who do not – that characterised the brutal civil war in the area two decades ago. Hemedti himself is a Rizeigat Arab from Darfur. In El Geneina, near the Chad border, clashes between the non-Arab Masalit community and the RSF, who come mostly from the Arab-identifying Rizeigat tribe, are intensifying. On 14 June, West Darfur's governor, a

(which briefly held power in Cairo before being ousted by the military in 2013), but say they represent a diminished threat after the fall of Bashir.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian officials, 2023. Abu Dhabi has indeed cultivated close ties with Hemedti but with army officers as well.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese civil society figures and politicians, 2023.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, political party representatives taking part in negotiations, March 2023.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Quad and African diplomats, April-May 2023.

¹⁰ Sudan Conflict Observatory, June 2023.

¹¹ "The Rise of Sudan's RSF and Their Leader 'Hemedti'", *The Horn* (Crisis Group podcast), 11 May 2023.

Masalit, was brutally killed in a development certain to escalate tensions. Sudanese and foreigners blamed the RSF for his murder.¹² The death toll among civilians in Darfur is expected to climb significantly. Refugees fleeing across the border bring tales of horrific atrocities in the settlements they left behind.¹³

The paramilitary force has stepped up attacks elsewhere in Darfur in an attempt to control major cities such as El Fasher, North Darfur's capital. Meanwhile, Darfur's ex-rebel groups appear to be repositioning in the face of growing intercommunal conflict. On 28 May, Minni Minawi, the ex-rebel governor of Darfur, called on civilians to take up arms in self-defence.¹⁴ He also vowed to protect civilians, by implication from the RSF, in a sign that his forces may be preparing to join the fray. Fighting between Arab-identifying and non-Arab groups in Darfur could easily spill into Chad and beyond.

The fighting is also spreading to Kordofan, the central region between Darfur and the Nile valley. The RSF has launched an attack on El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan, where a vital refinery sits along a major pipeline carrying Sudanese and South Sudanese oil. Meanwhile, the predominantly ethnic Nuba forces under the command of rebel leader Abdulaziz al-Hilu, of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, are taking advantage of the situation by expanding their foothold in South Kordofan, seizing abandoned army garrisons with little apparent difficulty.¹⁵

On the present trajectory, the warring parties and others look set to carve up Sudan into pockets of territory, with the RSF taking much of western Sudan and the army holding sway in much of the north and east, while armed groups, tribal leaders and warlords seize and widen their own zones of control. A collapsing Sudan will likely spread instability and strife across much of the region, a concern voiced with increasing urgency by prominent figures, even as the chances that the warring parties will heed these warnings and call off fighting appear forlorn. Addressing an IGAD heads of state meeting on 12 June, AU Commission Chair Moussa Faki Mahamat said:

If this war does not stop immediately, civil war will set in, chaos will prevail and the Sudanese state will totally collapse.¹⁶

III. Tracks Without Traction

Mediation thus far has struggled to gain traction. After weeks of failed ceasefire commitments, the two sides finally agreed to send delegations to Jeddah for "pre-negotiations" convened by Washington and Riyadh in early May. These talks focus on pausing

¹² "Sudanese, int'l community condemn killing of West Darfur wali, fingers pointed at RSF", Dabanga Sudan, 16 June 2023.

¹³ "Sudanese continue to flee Darfur in dire circumstances", Al Jazeera, 17 June 2023.

¹⁴ "Darfur general urges civilians to take up arms amidst escalating violence", *Sudan Tribune*, 13 June 2023.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, aid organisation officials in close contact with SPLM-North, June 2023.

¹⁶ "If this war does not stop immediately, the Sudanese state will totally collapse", News 24, 13 June 2023. Speaking at a Sudan donors' conference in Geneva on 19 June, UN Secretary-General António Guterres sounded a similar note of alarm, saying that a collapsing Sudan could become "a locus of lawlessness, radiating insecurity across the region". "Sudan: Guterres urges donors to boost aid response to halt death, destruction", UN News, 19 June 2023.

the fighting to deliver humanitarian aid and restore services to conflict-affected areas. They have achieved little. On 2 June, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia suspended the discussions, two days after the army had said it was taking a break, with Washington also imposing sanctions on commercial conglomerates under army control and others run by the RSF. The mediators brokered a 72-hour ceasefire starting on 18 June, threatening to end the talks if the parties did not abide by it. This ceasefire was somewhat more successful than previous ones, at least in Khartoum, but it did not last. The Jeddah talks' future remains in question.

Neither party has negotiated in good faith so far, as both view the war in existential terms. Each accuses the other of using any lull in combat to regroup and prepare for the next round, which is why no ceasefire holds. The RSF is occupying most of Khartoum's residential neighbourhoods and believes it is winning the battle for the capital. Despite the humanitarian imperative to do so, it will fiercely resist pressure to pull out of these areas until it has secured major concessions at the negotiating table. The army, meanwhile, believes that time is on its side. It wagers that the RSF's challenges in getting supplies to Khartoum, along with the narrowness of the paramilitary's ethnic support base, will eventually be its enemy's downfall.¹⁷ It also sees the RSF stretched thin in Darfur and North Kordofan. The army is thus loath to let aid into the capital, fearing that packages will end up in the RSF's hands, allowing the paramilitary to hold out longer.¹⁸ Both sides seek to use the humanitarian talks for tactical advantage in this standoff, with the military demanding that the RSF vacate residential areas and the RSF demanding that the army cease its aerial barrages.

Divisions in the senior ranks of the army are another obstacle to clinching a deal. Mediators have struggled to extract an agreement that sticks from Burhan, given that senior army officers hold divergent views, with some more intent than others on not calling a halt to fighting until the RSF has been destroyed.¹⁹

Sudanese civilians, who are excluded from the Jeddah talks and are themselves divided, have differing views about the way forward.²⁰ Some want a seat at the table in Jeddah, a request that mediators say the warring parties reject. Others prefer that civilian representatives wait until the army and RSF reach a durable ceasefire to join negotiations about a permanent cessation of hostilities and a political roadmap. Still others hope that Sudanese, perhaps under an AU umbrella, might be able to create a separate, all-inclusive civilian dialogue that could serve as the basis for civilian rule after the war ends. In any of these scenarios, determining which civilians – including members of established political parties, neighbourhood resistance committees with roots in the 2019 uprising, civil society organisations and ex-rebel groups, as well as Islamists and tribal leaders – should be chosen as representatives raises its own thorny questions. Similar dilemmas have complicated negotiations in Sudan ever since Bashir fell.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, politicians close to the army, June 2023.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency officials, June 2023.

¹⁹ The army delegation is led by Rear Admiral Mahjoub Bushra Ahmed Rahma. Although a senior officer, he is viewed as representing Burhan and perceived as lacking the authority to speak for the entire army leadership. Figures associated with the Islamist movement in the military are seen as more hardline and less inclined to accept a negotiated halt to the fighting.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023.

Diplomatic disarray also threatens to undermine peace efforts. External actors not included in the Jeddah talks, including the AU, European Union (EU) and UK, complain about a lack of communication from the small team holding the Sudan file for the U.S.²¹ The AU is commendably attempting to coordinate the various foreign parties and is contemplating leading its own negotiating track centred around Sudanese civilians, as is Kenya, which is now heading up IGAD mediation along with South Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Some fear that an African track would end up competing rather than converging with the military-focused Jeddah talks, which are endorsed by the League of Arab States.²² Intra-Arab tensions also linger. Western diplomats contend that UAE officials felt blindsided by their exclusion from the Jeddah discussions, which in effect jettisoned the Quad.²³ As its disputes with Riyadh over a host of issues quietly escalate, Abu Dhabi says it supports an AU process.²⁴ Egypt-Ethiopia enmity over the Blue Nile waters, with Sudan squeezed in between, is another fault line.²⁵

It is unclear even if all outside parties are equally committed to brokering a ceasefire. Every major foreign actor agrees a ceasefire is needed, both publicly and privately, but diplomats doubt that all their counterparts are doing everything they can to bring one about.²⁶ A number of countries in the Arab world – and not only Egypt – suggest that the most important thing is to make sure the army comes out on top.²⁷

IV. Pathways for Mediation

Notwithstanding the challenges, the huge stakes make it imperative that all parties with influence pull out all the stops to press the belligerents to halt the fighting. The first step is to look for any additional leverage outsiders might have over the warring parties and then, to the degree possible, use it in concert and in service of the same goal.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia should step up their engagement with key capitals, especially Cairo and Abu Dhabi, but also the AU in Addis Ababa, urging them to push

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Abu Dhabi and by telephone, April-June 2023.

²² Crisis Group interviews, African and UN officials, Addis Ababa, May 2023.

²³ The Quad, which also includes the UK, has ceased to function normally since the U.S.-Saudi track got under way. The UK is also miffed at being excluded. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, May-June 2023.

²⁴ Saudi-Emirati tensions are growing due to longstanding disagreements over Yemen and Riyadh's steady rise as a regional power. Crisis Group interviews, Emirati academics, UAE experts and Western diplomats, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, May 2023. See also Summer Said and Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. clash over oil and Yemen as rift grows," *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 March 2023.

²⁵ All three countries, but Egypt most heavily, rely on the Nile waters for irrigation, industry and domestic consumption. Ethiopia views Egypt as having taken more than its fair share of the waters for years. It has built an enormous dam on the Blue Nile to generate electricity. Egypt fears that the dam will threaten its water supply. For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°271, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior U.S. official; European and African officials, June 2023.

²⁷ Arab League statements have stressed support for Sudan's "national institutions", which is understood to mean the army. A senior Qatari official said Arab countries are "officially" united in preferring that the army gain the upper hand (with the caveat that some may have a different policy "after hours", an apparent implicit reference to the UAE). Qatar's relations with Burhan have improved since the 2021 coup. Crisis Group interview, Doha, May 2023.

the belligerents to end the war. The Jeddah talks' format is far from ideal, but at the moment there is no realistic alternative. No other option stands a chance of getting the warring parties together. U.S. and Saudi mediators should use the current pause in talks to explore whether at least Egypt, as a key army backer, and the UAE, as the country closest to the RSF, could join a next round. Publicly and privately, Cairo and Abu Dhabi both say they want a ceasefire; they are more likely to strive for one if they believe they can shape its outcome. Together, the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Egypt could press the army to send higher-ranking delegates. Mediators should also look into coercive measures such as threats of targeted sanctions and war crimes prosecutions of the warring parties if they show no sign of budging. The mediation team should ideally include at least one senior military officer, such as a U.S. defence official, who can talk directly to Burhan and Hemedti, given that military-to-military engagement seems to have produced results when foreign governments were evacuating their nationals in the war's first weeks.

Brokering agreement on the basics of a resolution to the core issue that triggered the war – whether and how the RSF could fall under the army's command – may be necessary to reaching a sustained ceasefire. Thus far, the Jeddah talks have aimed instead to first get a ceasefire in place as a way of opening space for wider negotiations on a settlement. But repeated failed ceasefires suggest that any real pause in fighting will remain elusive as long as both sides, especially the army (which fears it would be negotiating with a weak hand), believe they need to fight on to protect their interests. Mediators should of course continue to press the parties to abide by their humanitarian commitments and explore all means of de-escalation. At the same time, they might need to pivot to sketching at least the broad contours of a settlement that can end the violence.

Reshaping Sudan's military-security apparatus will have to be part of any agreement. Unfortunately, consensus will be nigh impossible to forge. The army and its backers demand that the RSF dissolve even though the army looks incapable of defeating the paramilitaries on the ground. Meanwhile, Hemedti will surely balk at integrating his forces into the military given that he is convinced the army aims to dismantle the RSF and his power base altogether, no matter what any agreement says. But Sudan's security apparatus needs an overhaul, as the war undeniably proves. The split between the army and RSF is one problem. Another is that top army leaders are divided, with divergent material interests, ideological leanings and positions regarding how to end the conflict. The army's officer corps, dominated by the riverine elite, is far from representative of Sudan's diversity. Civilians and the RSF also accuse it of proximity to Bashir cronies.

One option might be for diplomats in Jeddah to push the RSF to agree to join a single military and chain of command, the core army demand prior to the outbreak of war, in exchange for opening a discussion about how to reshape the military itself, a key demand of the RSF and civilians. It might take agreement on the rough outlines of such a process to enable a real ceasefire, which could then create room for shuttle diplomacy with Burhan, Hemedti and others on the technicalities, while ideally merging the Jeddah talks with an AU-led political track that brings in civilian representatives. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. would need to serve as guarantors, overseeing the agreement's implementation and mediating disputes should they arise. Egypt and the UAE would have to be on board. Mediators might also need to consider how to

prevent fissures within the army among hardliners, moderates and Bashir-era Islamists from blocking an accord, ideally by insisting on a delegation team that bridges these divides.

If talks continue to make no headway and the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, mediators may have to try other routes to ease the suffering of Sudanese. Some advocate for a third-party African force that could provide a buffer in areas from which both sides agree to withdraw to enable humanitarian aid delivery and, ideally, a broader ceasefire. But this option faces headwinds: the army is stridently opposed to bringing in a foreign force, as it would amount to opening the door to talks with Hemedti, whom they view as anathema, as well as greater outside oversight of Sudan's internal affairs. Others suggest bypassing the army's bureaucratic obstacles by channelling relief through grassroots networks that are already providing assistance to those in need, including to neighbourhood committees in Khartoum. These groups, too, will struggle to get aid through the countless checkpoints. But if no better choice presents itself, mediators may be forced to consider variants of those above to funnel assistance to people in need.

As for the political path forward, Sudan's civilians will need to play a central role in charting it. Neither the military nor the RSF, both of whose credibility is shattered, will be able to govern Sudan by conventional means once the fighting stops. Nor can either rule the sprawling, diverse country through coercion alone. At the same time, given the divisions among the main civilian forces, it would be easy for talks about Sudan's future to degenerate into endless squabbles over power sharing as the country slips further into chaos. A technocratic caretaker government is thus the most promising option to explore.

The AU should work with eminent Sudanese civilians of diverse regional and ethnic origins on forming such a caretaker government, while coordinating its efforts through the Core Group it formed that includes the UN, IGAD, the Arab League, the European Union, the Quad countries and some neighbouring states, and consulting with the country's various civil, political, regional and tribal actors.²⁸ With AU backing, Sudanese should ready this caretaker government to step in if the generals agree to stop fighting. It should be carefully assembled to have the buy-in of as many Sudanese as possible. While the military should have no say in its membership, such a government would have to be broadly acceptable to the army and RSF, as it could not operate without at least the warring parties' tacit approval. The army opposed a civilian government made up of its political foes but has often spoken in favour of a consensus government composed of technocrats. This government's mandate should be narrow: restarting basic services, bringing in humanitarian relief, facilitating a national peace-building process and beginning to revive institutions.

²⁸ Former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok has offered to participate in such a process. Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, May 2023. Some Sudanese say he has unique convening power but prefer that he be part of the process rather than lead it. Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023. For their part, many African and Western diplomats think he should be involved but differ as to his exact role. Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, Nairobi and by telephone, May-June 2023. Egyptian officials have reservations about Hamdok, whom they perceive as too close to Abu Dhabi (where he resides now) and Addis Ababa (where he lived before becoming prime minister in 2019). They may oppose a process he leads. Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian and Western officials, 2023.

While such an option would fall far short of many Sudanese civilians' ambitions to wrest back full control of the state, a technocratic caretaker government may be the only way out of war that avoids entrenching military rule. Ideally, of course, an end to the war would immediately restore power to civilians. Realistically, though, neither of the warring parties will accept entirely submitting to a civilian body's authority. Such a caretaker government should be seen as a way to buy time to help Sudanese resolve the differences of opinion that helped derail the 2019-2021 civilian government and the 2022-2023 negotiations to bring back civilian rule. The AU's stewardship will be important, but others with influence or convening power with eminent Sudanese, including the EU and major European states, should consider how to help lend momentum to the AU process.

As they prepare the caretaker cabinet, Sudanese should take care to avoid leaving the impression they are creating a government in exile. The pitfalls of governments in exile are well known, including their usual inability to gain formal power (which weakens the members, who in Sudan's case would be civilians, in the public's eye) and their tendency to forestall other potential political tracks.

The caretaker government might also shepherd a national process that can tackle larger questions about the country's future – such as relations between centre and periphery, the cause of many past civil wars – without impinging upon Sudan's right to a functional government in the interim. There are various options that Sudanese themselves will have to work through. One may be to hold discussions about a representative legislative council that, once formed, could oversee government while deliberating on the transition ahead. Another might be a slower-paced, broader-based dialogue that tries to forge consensus about how to build a new civilian state after decades of military rule and ethnic strife.²⁹ Whatever form it takes, such a track should also include Islamists. Many Sudanese believe the army's Islamist factions have been the main obstacle to restoring civilian rule.³⁰ Islamists would have less to lose – and thus be less prone to spoiling a ceasefire – if they knew that the process to come would be more open to their involvement than the talks preceding the war, which excluded some Islamist parties.

With Darfur teetering on the edge of renewed catastrophe (and reports suggest that West Darfur has already tumbled over), the AU and UN, in consultation with neighbouring states and Darfuri actors, should consider ways to stop or mitigate the fighting and its effects. Such efforts ought to focus on how to broker local ceasefires, enable humanitarian aid and prevent cross-border spillover.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese politicians and civil society figures, May-June 2023. Former Prime Minister Hamdok suggests that such a broader deliberative dialogue, while it would take a long time, is necessary. Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, May 2023.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese political party and civil society representatives, May-June 2023.

V. **Staying on the Same Page**

Such a coordinated plan of state rescue will require a common vision among Sudanese, Arab, African and Western parties. All outside parties need to upgrade their diplomacy, which has failed to rise to the urgency of the moment.

Given its role in creating the Jeddah track, the U.S. in particular will be important in bridging any gap between political and security talks while staving off competing initiatives. Foreign actors have struggled thus far to marshal a united front to end the war. The U.S. should reappoint a special envoy with a full-time mandate on Sudan, including to engage at the top levels with the country's African and Arab neighbours, as it had for most of the last two decades. The envoy's office should staff up to previous levels.

Other actors should also harmonise what they are doing. By including the AU in the Jeddah talks alongside Egypt and the UAE, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. would help align political and security efforts. As they pursue their political process, the AU and UN should work closely with the Arab League, which has endorsed the Jeddah track, as well as with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia directly. IGAD, in particular, which is pursuing its own mediation led by Kenya, should match up its endeavours with those of the AU. Diplomats need to also monitor growing intra-Arab fissures, particularly those between Abu Dhabi and both Riyadh and Cairo, which could obstruct peacemaking.³¹

As head of the Core Group's political track, the AU has special responsibilities. It needs to be careful that neither the Egypt-Ethiopia enmity over the use of Nile waters nor the Arab-African divide over the country's future poisons the well for diplomacy. The AU could consider rotating any sustained talks on the composition of a caretaker government or its mandate between capitals, such as Addis Ababa (the AU's seat) and Cairo (the Arab League's headquarters), or if security permits, among outside capitals and a city inside Sudan, like Port Sudan, to make the process broadly acceptable and to stave off competing efforts.

The AU Peace and Security Council should heed calls to appoint a former head of state, an envoy of similar stature or a panel of eminent African leaders to steer the AU's efforts. The UN should do likewise. The level at which mediators engage, as well as their stature and credibility, registers with the warring parties. Should the mediators send higher-ranking diplomats, the belligerents themselves would be more likely to appoint high-level representatives, with the power to make decisions during negotiations, which is not the case at the moment. Such representatives would be better able to engage with the mediators, directly and at the highest levels.

All the while, the AU, U.S., EU and UN should press regional actors to refrain from any intervention that could escalate the war into a proxy free-for-all. It will be difficult to keep everyone on the same page, but the alternative could very well be Sudan's collapse.

³¹ As noted above, the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi tensions concern other matters besides Sudan. The disagreements regarding Sudan predate the civil war. Saudi officials, worried that growing frictions between Burhan and Hemedti could lead to violence, voiced concern about Emirati links with Hemedti. Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh, March 2023. Emirati officials, for their part, expressed frustration that the Saudis are viewed as more neutral even though they, too, had cultivated close ties with both the army and RSF over the years. Crisis Group interviews, Emirati experts, Abu Dhabi, May 2023.

VI. Conclusion

The window to halt fighting before Sudan descends into a prolonged multi-sided conflict that spells state failure and years of bloody conflict is fast closing. The gravity of that outcome is hard to overstate. A collapsed Sudan could create a haven for transnational militants – who already hold sway on other African battlefields – mercenaries and traffickers who could plague the country's neighbourhood for years to come. World powers and others with influence over the parties need to act with the alacrity the crisis warrants, all the more so because the challenge of convincing the two sides, who remain hellbent on destroying each other, is so great. With neither showing any sign of compromise, there are no easy solutions. Indeed, any prescription today risks having an element of the quixotic. Still, given just how catastrophic war in Sudan would be, African, Arab and Western powers have no choice but to commit much more diplomatic capital than they have to date, particularly to averting a regional melee.

In the more than 65 years since independence, Sudan's elites have failed to fashion a coherent state that can reliably protect all its citizens. In the medium term, Sudanese will need to hold far-reaching discussions about a new political settlement, especially on ways to manage diversity, distribute resources and share political power. The absence of such a compact explains the country's decades-long tumult, which has now arrived at its very centre. The immediate priority, however, is to halt fighting that can have no winner apart from the warlords able to exploit it. The RSF has seized much of the capital but alienated many of its residents, who regard them as ransacking invaders. Meanwhile, the army has shown that it is willing to bomb the city to cling to power. Sudanese civilians are right to reject the war. Now they need to put political differences aside to agree on an interim arrangement for governing the country. There is still time to halt Sudan's slide into disintegration, but not much.

Nairobi/Brussels, 22 June 2023

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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